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ABSTRACT

This paper examines recent Australian children's literature. It focuses on the prevailing social attitudes in Australia towards gender, environment, and multiculturalism and how these social issues are treated in the fiction books written for Australian children. The paper also examines the implications for children's literature of the expectations for authors to present a correct ideological stance towards these issues and if these expectations can be construed as a "new censorship." Through their leadership school librarians can encourage children to read widely and to discuss and question the social issues which are raised. (KRN)

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**Social Issues in Australian Children's Literature -**

A presentation for IASL by Judith Phillips - Senior Lecturer, Monash University College Gippsland, Victoria, Australia.

In the past ten years there has been a discernible trend in Australian Children's Literature towards the inclusion of social problems as subjects to be treated within children's books. This probably reflects a world - wide trend to raise children's social consciousness through the books they read.

Australia in 1992 is suffering severe economic hardship with unemployment, child homelessness and drug and alcohol abuse high on the list of social problems effecting children. Along with these immediate social problems are the wider issues of the environment, multiculturalism and the rights of the aboriginal people, issues which daily concern our media. Considerable controversy and debate has arisen within our society, as many people blame the latter issues for the economic decline of the nation. These issues, of course, have become topics for children to study and discuss in schools, with educational authorities setting guidelines for the approach to be taken by teachers.

It is not surprising therefore, that children's authors should be caught up in the debate and children's books be seen as a legitimate forum for authors to impart values and present a specific ideological stance. Is this the purpose of children's literature?

That there does seem to be a growing trend towards a new didactism in Australian children's literature is being resisted by some authors, for example Victor Kelleher (an award winning author for both children and adults) states that "I often suspect that many kids books, including my own, are not discussed for what they are but rather are measured against what they should be. And that "should" that hidden imperative, is too frequently a corollary of fixed modes of thought ". (Kelleher p.221). Kelleher seems to have a point in

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being concerned with the "fixed modes of thought" of what a book "should be", for in 1991 the judges of the Australian Children's Book Awards stated, in their introduction to the awards, that "the judges were encouraged to see the continuing trend of producing strong, non-sexist books and the development of a realistic and authentic portrayal of adults. There is an increasing recognition in children's literature that male and female characters can play an equal role in all aspects of life" ("Reading Time", p.5). While I wholehearted agree with these sentiments, there is a hidden imperative here for authors to conform to the ideology of gender equality which translates to feminist theory ie. books with mainly male characters are out, romance fiction for females is out, all children's books must now conform to a non-sexist, feminist agenda.

It would seem that authors and publishers are responding to perceived societal needs in producing books which they hope will be instrumental in giving children correct attitudes towards social issues. In this they will of course be aided by librarians, teachers and parents, who will guide children towards books which they feel inculcate the currently accepted values put forward by various influential sectors of society including political initiatives with a social context. If we accept this, in whatever good cause, we are inviting the "teachers and preachers" to take over, and we will see a resurgence of the didactic "evangelical style" novels of the nineteenth century, from which we thought we had escaped.

This growing trend towards a re-newed didactism seems to be particularly affecting picture books, many of which state the cause for which they were written. The author is not even relying on the child to get the message through the story-line! The danger in this overt didactism is that children are not given the right to think for themselves or to form their own opinions. In the face of the overwhelming effect of the mass media and technology in

the lives of our children, it is essential that children's books promote the creative imagination of the child reader rather than concentrating on some explicit social issue.

I am not convinced that literature for children should be "a tool to shape the young to the needs of the world". (Jackson, 1989) Literature should not be a vehicle for propaganda, no matter how important we consider the issue. Children should be empowered through literature; encouraged to grow, to learn about themselves and others. Literature should give children that magic; that sense of wonder and hope in the future, which will help them to face the problems and issues which are so blatantly obvious within the world community. Children must be given the opportunity to question, to criticize and form an opinion for themselves, they should not be coerced into any current political or social correctness or exptected to conform to any particular authors ideological stance.

The theme of this conference is towards the 21st century; through their leadership school-librarians can encourage children to read widely and to discuss and question the social issues which are raised. They can promote diversity, and the individuals right "to choose". We must not allow ourselves to become 'purifiers' of children's books or allow ourselves to manipulate children through the literature they read.

These ideological questions affect us all and need to be fully discussed. It should also be of some interest to teacher-librarians whether children *are* "socialized through literature", do children read "the lectures" which many children's books contain or are children of that subversive race, who despite all our ministrations - miss the moral of the story entirely and formulate their own meanings? As we head towards the 21st Century, the implications for teacher-librarians contained in this paper are ones which require considerable deliberation.

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